

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF THE ETHNOLOGY OF THE NICOBARESE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *COCOS NUCIFERA* LINN¹

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Cocos nucifera Linn. grows wild and is also cultivated in the Nicobar group of islands. Various ethnobotanical uses by the Nicobarese aborigines have been described. The uses of 44 other plant species in combination with coconut palm as ingredients in medicine have been explored. The tree has been assessed as "tree of life" among Nicobarese.

The Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago situated in Bay of Bengal lies between 6° and 14° N latitude and 92° and 94° E longitude. The Nicobar group (separated by 'ten degree channel' from the Andaman group) from northern most Car Nicobar to Great Nicobar Island stretches about 293 Km on length and has a maximum width of 57 Km and occupies an area of about 1953 sq Km. The Nicobar Islands consist of about 28 islands and the major islands are Car Nicobar, Chowra, Teresa and Bompoka (north group); Katchal, Nancowry, Trinket and Kamorta (Central group); Pullomillo, Little Nicobar, Kondul and Great Nicobar (South group). These islands show a uniform tropical warm humid climate with the temperature ranging from 22°C to 32°C; average annual rainfall ranges from about 300 cm in north to about 380 cm in south. Mean relative humidity is about 85%. *Cocos nucifera* Linn., (Coconut tree) is widely cultivated in tropical regions of both Old and New World. Considerable controversy exists as to the original home of coconuts

(Beccari 1917, 1919, Hill 1929, Patel 1938, Menon & Pandalai 1960, Purselove 1968 and Tanaka 1976). Many of these believe that it might have originated in any one of the places in South East Asia from Malaysia to Melanesia. According to Baker (1970) it may actually be more closely related to the palms of Indian ocean than to New World's native palms. It has been supposed to be indigenous in the Indian Archipelago and on the Nicobar and Cocos islands of the Bay of Bengal—and this would explain its early cultivation on the coasts of India and Ceylon (Blatter 1926). In view of these controversies it is interesting that it grows in wild populations in several islands of Nicobars including Car Nicobar, Teresa, Tillangchong, Katchal, Kamorta and Little Nicobar. Balakrishnan & Nair (1979) have compared various parameters of tall and dwarf plants in these islands. However, more interesting is that the aborigines of these islands are dependent on *Cocos nucifera*, so much in their ritual and religious ceremonies, food, medicine and various other applications that it appears 'a tree of life' to them. Some of these applications have been dealt in this paper after extensive studies in these islands:

1. *Vernacular names*: All the Nicobarese speak a language, called 'nicobarese', though

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some dialectic differences exist in three different groups of islands. Various parts are named by the following names in Central Nicobarese language (Man 1889):

- Coconut tree (young) — hishöi
 (After commencing to bear) —
 Chia oyàu
 fruit — Yuang — oyàu
 leaf (young) — nêak; (mature green) — dai-oyàu; (withered) pâl-oyàu.
 flower spathe — shíat-oyàu
 leaf stalk — lamoah-oyàu
 leaf sheath — hen hâl — oyàu
 fruit stalk — chaiyuh — oyàu
 husk (of ripe nut) — Kentóit; (of unripe nut) — Kato;
 shell (entire) — hishoya (as used for holding water).
 shell-full — hishoya-oal
 shell half (for use as cup) — enfâ; taiyâk
 shell half (for baling canoe) — tane- dâk-düe
 shell piece — endain-tat
 Coconut shell (immature) — Müak - ninàu
 Kernel (of ripe nut) — enyul; (of unripe nut) — henchain; (of sprouting nut) — hõak
 rind of Kernel — Kafat — yuang-oyàu
 Kopra (dried Kernel) — ngoât-ta-koâp
 paste — ngoât-ta-koín-ha.
 water (of ripe nut) — dâk-ngoât
 water (of half ripe nut) — dâk-ninàu
 scraper — ok-hang-ai
 scraper (ripe, husked) — yuang-oyàu-hetch-ât

- scraper (ripe unhusked) — Yuang-oyàu-hokok
 scraper (unripe husked) — ninàu-hetshât
 scraper (unripe unhusked) — ninàu-hokók
 (ripe shell) — kaiyuâk
 (unripe shell) — Kanlõnga
 tree tabooed — Oyàu-henhwâva.
 toddy — kaut.

2. *Coconut in folk tales and folk songs:*

There are many tales in the folk lore of the Nicobarese but people living in Car Nicobar tell a story about the genesis of coconut tree. "Once upon a time", they say, "there was a great scarcity of water on the island. From somewhere a man appeared who through sheer magic produced water from his elbow. The people, thinking him to be a devil incarnate, chopped off his head. But a tree sprouted where the head fell and that grew big and began to bear fruit resembling the head of the be-headed man. People were afraid to touch the tree or to eat its fruit. Ripe fruits continued to fall, and many trees grew, resulting in a dense coconut grove. An old man who lay dying; was persuaded by some wise men to taste the fruit. The old man found it so delicious that he continued to eat the nuts and drink the water of these nuts. He regained his strength and began to look like and feel a young man. Therefore, the people began to eat the coconut".

Folk songs sung by Nicobarese on various occasions of joy, in ceremonies and rites are rich in references to plants, particularly about coconut tree. The following song in Car Nicobarese is indicative of the deep insight, common sense and practical wisdom of aboriginals:
 Ma ön ngho to ô kô
 Nõ raneh lö kuihi
 Rõl kangen talöökõ an

Nö vi karen nö anahan nômö hi
 Heng kangen nun minë roi
 Hêng Kangen nun minë sét
 Ot ngö re pöri nup rong
 Hol re to nup up inre
 Po hî nya kafa nö re
 Oi lö tö lâ in u
 Pati i vö in tö ngam kaha taökö
 Keu heut tö ren taneüngen in inup alaho
 Yeh yen tö i ha öo nyö ó no alhaha hî

This piece of folk song means; "Coconut tree is the means of our Life and can be used in many ways in our traditional life. The leaves and fruits give us cloth and food. The trunk is used in constructing huts. There are various other uses also. Considering it to be the tree of life, let us sing in praise of it."

3. *Coconut in rituals and traditional religion:*

The traditional practice of keeping as much close and healthy relationship as possible with the dead is kept up by the Nicobarese of Katchal, Nancowry and some other islands. skull of the buried person is retained in the house for sometime and food is served to it and later it is buried again. At the time, a 'takoya' mark is made, as an indication that nobody should use the coconuts of a particular tree(s), as it remains in the sole charge of the spirit of the dead. Animism has been the traditional religion of the Nicobarese, largely marked by the dominance and interplay of spirit worship, witch-doctors (specially in Chowra island) and animal sacrifice. In order to worship and keep the spirit happy, they hang, every year, a few coconuts sprinkled with cock blood, by the ceiling of their huts. At times the leaves of some trees, and green coconuts are hung at the entrance to a sickman's room. Nicobarese also observe a communal festival as a precaution against evil spirit and the coconut leaves are hung at various spots in the villages.

Coconut trees along with canoes and huts will descend to the surviving members of the family according to their traditional law of inheritance.

4. *Medicinal and other uses:*

Tapping of toddy from the unopened spadices of coconut, making various preparations from kernels and coconut oil, feeding raw or ripe nuts to domestic animals, using the tree trunk as timber for hut construction and leaves for thatching and crafting mats, screens, baskets, etc, and preparing pag shed-heaths and bathrooms from leaves, extracting fibre from leaves, using leaves and fibrous mesocarp of fruits as fuel, and shells as domestic utensils, etc, are some of the traditional uses of the coconut tree. By striking the shells in the evening they call the pigs to their respective hearths, leaves are burnt during night as torch for hunting the octopus and crabs while the fibrous pericarp of the shell is burnt during night as mosquito repellent. Nicobarese depend upon coconuts and areca nuts (*Areca catechu* Linn.) for their trade as they have been exchanging these for other useful items since ancient times. Now, the surplus nuts are also sold out for cash. The oil is extracted from coconuts which is classed as edible, lubricant and luminous. Besides the above mentioned uses the coconut tree is a useful medicinal plant. In China, the bark of the root is recommended as astringent and styptic to treat hemorrhages and fluxes, in Indochina, the roots are regarded as antipyretic and diuretic to treat blennorrhoea, liver trouble, and, in decoction with some other roots for, bronchitis, in Malay Peninsula these are pounded into a poultice to treat venereal diseases, also ground up with goose bones and prescribed as an antidote against *Datura* poisoning, and the ash of the shell, with wine, is a treat-

ment for certain phases of syphilis (Perry 1980). The Nicobarese use coconut as an ingredient of many drugs. Coconut water commonly known as 'daab paani' is a laxative and refreshing drink and taken for jaundice and other diseases also, but the oil has been used by Nicobarese as an ingredient of many drugs prepared from various plant species. Some of these have been dealt here in the following account :

i) Green leaves of fern *Vittaria elongata* Sw. mixed with coconut oil and leaves of *Lepidopetalum jackianum* Radlk. and *Pongamia pinnata* (L.) Merr. are made into a paste used for curing rheumatism and stiffness of swollen joints. Similarly *Masserschmidia argentea* (L.f.) Johnst. leaves macerated in coconut oil are rubbed on body in lumbago. Other combinations of coconut oil for rheumatism and lumbago are leaves of *Ipomoea pes-caprae* (L.) Sweet and *Euphorbia atoto* Forst. f., leaves of *Scaevola taccada* (Gaertn.) Roxb. and *Syzygium samarangense* (Bl.) Merr. & Perry; roots of *Clerodendrum inerme* Gaertn. *Glochidion sumatranum* Miq. leaves mixed with leaves of *Colubrina asiatica* (L.) Brongn. and coconut oil is used for making a paste for sprained muscles and dislocated joints. Tender twigs of *Bruguiera gymnorhiza* Lamk. mixed with *Ocimum sanctum* Linn. and coconut oil are rubbed on body in tiredness and the latter mixed with the leaves of *Duranta plumieri* Jacq. is rubbed on swellings. Leaves of *Cassia occidentalis* Linn.; *Datura metel* Linn. and *Solanum nigrum* Linn.; pounded together in coconut oil are rubbed on as a cure for bodyache.

ii) The pounded leaves of *Cassia tora* Linn. mixed with coconut oil is boiled and rubbed on the body in cutaneous diseases. *Cayratia trifolia* (L.) Domin is also used similarly as the above species.

iii) Leaves of *Calophyllum inophyllum* Linn. pounded with *Piper betle* Linn. leaves and coconut oil and sea water are tied with a bandage on fractured bones and to cure sprained muscles. Leaves of *Clerodendrum inerme* (L.) Gaertn. and *Leea aequata* Linn. are also used in the same way. Combination of coconut oil with the leaves of *Ficus ampelas* Burm., *Morinda citrifolia* Linn. and *Colubrina asiatica* (L.) Brongn. is also used for fractured bones.

iv) *Cleidion nitidum* Thw. and *Leea aequata* Linn. are boiled to make a paste with coconut oil, cooled and applied on large cuts and wounds. Tender leaves of *Solanum melongena* Linn. warmed and smeared with coconut oil are kept on ulcers for making pus concentrate at a point and for relieving pain.

v) Leaves of *Euphorbia atoto* Forst. f. pounded with turmeric (*Curcuma longa* Linn.) and coconut oil, boiled and taken for healing up the wounds in throat, mouth cavity, and for gums.

vi) Green leaves of *Alstonia macrophylla* Roxb. along with leaves of *Morinda citrifolia* Linn. are macerated in hand and mixed with coconut water and drunk during severe stomach ache.

vii) Twigs and leaves of *Ochrocarpus volubilis* (Lour.) Merr., pounded with leaves of *Cassia occidentalis* Linn. are boiled in coconut oil, cooled and rubbed on the body to cure pneumonia.

viii) Green leaves of *Dimocarpus longam* Lour. pounded with *Cassia occidentalis* Linn. and coconut oil are rubbed on the body of a child as febrifuge. Green leaves of *Cassia occidentalis* Linn. are crushed in coconut oil and rubbed on the body of the newly born child having fever.

ix) Leaves of *Peperomea pellucida* (L.) HB&K boiled in coconut oil and rubbed on

body of newly born child. This paste is also used by young people to assist muscle development.

x) Leaves of *Solanum nigrum* Linn., *Datura metel* Linn. and *Cassia occidentalis* Linn. are pounded together in coconut oil and rubbed on body in fever. Leaves of *Dendrobium crumenatum* Sw. are boiled in oil and rubbed on body in fever. The inflorescence of *Cyperus javanicus* Houtt. is pounded with coconut oil and after keeping in sunlight for about half an hour rubbed on body as diaphoretic agent in cold, fever, and malaria. Similarly green leaves of *Gossypium herbaceum* Linn. crushed with castor and coconut oil are boiled in a little water and the paste is used as febrifuge and diaphoretic in malaria and fevers giving shivering. *Hyptis capitata* Jacq. leaves are also pounded in coconut oil and rubbed on body as febrifuge.

xi) Green leaves of *Triumfetta rhomboidea* Jacq. pounded with rhizome of *Zingiber officinale* Rosc. and fruit of *Citrus limon* (L.) Burm. f. are fried in coconut oil and taken for cough and bronchial complaints.

xii) Leaves of *Stachytarpheta indica* (L.)

Vahl are boiled with castor oil and 'tari' and after cooling given to women in fever after delivery.

xiii) A few seeds of *Trichosanthes bracteata* (Lamk.) Voigt. are added to 'tari' drink for enhancing its effect.

xiv) Entire plant of *Solanum surattense* Burm. is macerated in coconut oil and given to cattle before they give birth to their calves.

xv) Green leaves of *Parabaena sagittata* Miers. are crushed in coconut oil and the paste is used on the incision of snake bite.

We can conclude that coconut-tree is being used as a basic unit for food, medicine, shelter, trade and above all in religious and ritual traditions by the aboriginals of Nicobar islands. It has proved 'a tree of life' for them.

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